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SHAKESPEARE'S HEROES AND RUSKIN'S GALLANTRY

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Although one may be willing to concede Shakespeare's recognition of woman's refining influence on man, it is somewhat difficult to admire Ruskin's brief in support of the proposition. Since in the discussion of this question he is an advocate rather than a judge, it is to be feared that, like most other advocates, he has juggled the evidence. Shakespeare's heroes are either disparaged or entirely ignored; his good women are overestimated, and his wicked ones forgotten.

Ruskin begins with a sweeping generalization. "Note broadly in the outset," he says, "Shakespeare has no heroes;—he has only heroines."¹ This statement is then grudgingly qualified. "There is not one entirely heroic figure in all his plays, except the slight sketch of Henry the Fifth, exaggerated for the purposes of the stage; and the still slighter Valentine in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*." In the first place, "exaggeration for the purposes of the stage" is nothing else but stagecraft. As for the "slightness" of these two "sketches," it should be noticed that they are no more lightly limned than several of the women whom Ruskin names as being "conceived in the highest heroic type of humanity"—Corodelia, Desdemona, Perdita, Silvia, and Virgilia. Indeed, when appraising the heroes, it is well to bear in mind how colorlessly drawn are many of these so-called heroines. Virgilia, whom Ruskin regards as "perhaps loveliest," is in reality intolerably inane.

The essayist next takes up the "labored and perfect plays," and sets up for demolition such obviously faulty men as Coriolanus, Caesar, Antony, and Romeo. The Merchant of Venice is condemned for being "languidly submissive to adverse fortune." What would Ruskin have had Antonio do? "Rail on Lady Fortune in good terms?" Hysterically pace up and down on the Rialto,

¹ *Sesame and Lilies*, § 56.

begging for funds with which to hold off the relentless Jew? Sunken argosies are not the best kind of security. Though later criticism has shown the legal nullity of the bond, Antonio believes it to be binding and calmly prepares to pay the forfeit. His is not the swashbuckling type of heroism, but consists in quiet self-sacrifice. No heroine of Shakespeare's is willing to lay down her life for another of her sex: Antonio's love for Bassanio is passing the love of woman—for woman!

Ruskin totally ignores several male characters that approach nearer to the heroic than most of those whose claims he considers worthy of notice. Hector, in *Troilus and Cressida*, leads in moral perception as well as in valor; he sees the injustice of the quarrel, urges the return of Helen, and finally consents to the continuation of the war only because he believes that—

'Tis a cause that hath no mean dependance
Upon our joint and several dignities.

Though he admits that Hector is "valiant and generous," Dr. Dowden does not approve of the Trojan's "spending his life in a cause which he knows to be unprofitable, if not evil." But it must be remembered that, according to the standards of his time, Hector must put aside all ethical doubts and remain loyal to his family and to his country. The many favorable references to Hector that are to be found in other Shakespearean plays furnish added evidence of the dramatist's fondness for the character.

As has been pointed out by one of Ruskin's editors, Professor Herbert Bates, "Surely . . . Brutus comes very near to heroic stature." Without reviewing the extended controversy concerning the "noblest Roman of them all," we will but remind the reader that Antony's familiar eulogy, coming as it does from an enemy, must be taken as reflecting the dramatist's own opinion. The last three lines express the very essence of heroism:

His life was gentle, and the elements
So mix'd in him that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world, "This was a man!"

Philip the Bastard, the blunt, faithful follower of King John, is a hero of the unvarnished type. In one of his whimsical soliloquies this likable character tells us that gain will be his lord;

yet he remains loyal at a time when "John" and "gain" are far from synonymous. His valor is beyond question; and his softer qualities come to the surface when he finds the body of young Arthur, his master's political rival.

Some other Shakespearean heroes are Alcibiades, redoubtable in war, loyal to his friend, and gentle toward the embittered Timon; Lucius, deliverer of the "sad Andronici"; Edgar, whose virility and filial love need no elaboration; Macduff, who, tempted by his own chief, emerges triumphant and frees his country from the tyrant's grasp; Talbot, the intrepid marshal in *I Henry VI*, not easily scathed either by woman's wiles or by weapons of war; Richmond, a heroic figure in spite of the fact that, like one of Ruskin's heroines, Perdita, he looms up only near the end of the story; and, finally, Prospero—fancifully conceived, but altogether wholesome.

Not only does Ruskin's enthusiasm lead him to underrate or overlook Shakespeare's heroes, but, reversing the common Adamic dictum, he blames the man for all the trouble. "The catastrophe of every play is caused always by the folly or fault of a man; the redemption, if there be any, is by the wisdom and virtue of a woman, and failing that, there is none."¹ In support of this view, he naïvely instances King Lear, whose misery, he says, "is owing to his want of judgment, his impatient vanity, his misunderstanding of his children; the virtue of his one true daughter would have saved him from all the injuries of the others, unless he had cast her away from him; as it is, she all but saves him." But surely the ingratitude of Regan and Goneril is at least as much to blame as his own senile credulity: both elements contribute to the catastrophe. In a subsequent paragraph, Ruskin himself somewhat inconsistently mentions the "fatal influence" of the unnatural daughters, as well as that of Lady Macbeth. Furthermore, he evidently forgets Edgar, Lucius, Macduff, and Richmond—none of whom needs a woman's influence to help him in the work of "redemption."

Finally, it is interesting to note the characteristic chivalry with which Ruskin discusses the "follies and faults" of Shakespeare's

¹ *Op. cit.*, § 57.

women. "Among all the principal figures . . . there is but one weak woman—Ophelia."¹ But what of Helena's indecorous courting of Bertram, who constitutes her fee for the professional services rendered to the ailing king? Although she voices a lame and tardy protest, she is quite content to accept the reluctant, scepter-driven youth. Her own unwomanly forwardness is largely responsible for the heart-aches that she must later endure.

Ruskin's gallantry, however, is best exhibited by his statement that "there are three wicked women among the principal figures, Lady Macbeth, Regan, and Goneril." Candor compels one to extend the list. The wife of Cymbeline instigates the king to defy Rome, is ready to dispatch Imogen "except she bend her humour," plots against the life of the faithful Pisanio, and has for Cymbeline "a mortal mineral." The evil influence of Margaret, queen to Henry VI, extends through three plays. In *II Henry VI*, she shamelessly exchanges amorous protestations with Suffolk, and plots the destruction of Gloucester, her husband's "crutch." In the next play, after an exultant, bloodthirsty preamble, she murders the helpless York, whose "inly sorrow" draws tears even from one of her own followers. After Henry's death deprives the old queen of her power, she divides her time in *Richard III* between gloating over the misfortunes of others and croaking curses upon those who have escaped misery. She is altogether a despicable figure: a second Lady Macbeth, with the added sin of marital infidelity! In *Titus Andronicus*, we find the wolfish figure of Tamora. She commits adultery, assists in the murder of Bassianus, urges the maltreatment of Lavinia, conspires against the life of the guiltless young Andronici, and bids Aaron christen their natural child with his "dagger's point." Lastly, there are the two historic wantons, Cressida and Cleopatra, neither of whom is spared by Shakespeare. Does not each of these five women, by her "fault or folly," help bring about the catastrophe?

It is unfortunate that Ruskin's deep veneration for the sex led him to so partial and unscholarly a discussion of an interesting question. Woman's case needs no bolstering.

¹ *Ibid.*, § 58.